

The Arizona Republic editorialized as follows:

State Schools Superintendent Tom Horne has called for legislation to allow the state to take over entire districts and school boards for poor student performance.

In Roosevelt's case, such action would be certainly justified...

I want to be sure that the Department of Education does everything humanly possible to help the Roosevelt School District substantially improve its academic performance. If we can do that together, then the question of taking over the Roosevelt School District will never have to come up.

First, let's discuss just how bad the problem is. We selected three comparison districts, each one of which has substantially similar poverty and higher ELL rates than Roosevelt.

In third grade math, 64% and 67% at Phoenix Elementary and Murphy and 78% at Alhambra, are proficient. Roosevelt is far below, at 45%.

In third grade reading, 66% at Phoenix Elementary, 62% at Murphy, and 72% at Alhambra are proficient. Roosevelt's rate is only 34%. The same is true in the other measures: Roosevelt is substantially below each one of the comparison districts at every grade level, in every subject, 27 separate measures.

Furthermore, Roosevelt is in a steep decline in its third grade reading scores: from 58% to 34% in the past three years.

The Department of Education has experience to make recommendations for the Roosevelt School District. 10 of its 21 schools are underperforming or failing, and another five are having difficulty implementing the state's Reading First initiative. That is 15 out of the 21 schools.

I am going to present the Board with one single thing to do. If it does it conscientiously, then within the next three years people all over the state will be talking about how well Roosevelt students are doing academically. Just one thing. Here it is:

Put all the energy you have into finding the very best instructional leader that you can find to be superintendent. Give him or her a three-year contract, with specific academic goals of percentage of students to be proficient at the end of the three years. Hold the superintendent accountable for meeting those goals within three years. Then, get out of his or her way. Here is the most important part: provide in the contract, and publicly pledge, that the superintendent will have full authority to hire and fire, and that neither the board nor any of its members will interfere in any way with any hiring or firing decisions.

This is not an easy pledge for any board member to make, unless all make it. As the Republic editorial stated, the district has long suffered from "rampant nepotism," and I believe that has been the most serious barrier preventing academic achievement.

If a school has a strong instructional leader as principal, other problems can be solved. If it does not, almost nothing else that you do will make any difference.

One other point. Everyone familiar with the Roosevelt district talks about power struggles between Latinos and African Americans. It is hard to stomach that such a thing could exist in the United States of America in 2005. The only thing that should matter is the academic achievement of each student, as an individual, and what each staff member can contribute to academic achievement, as an individual. It should be absolutely prohibited to ever refer to someone's ethnicity, when our goal must be the academic achievement of the students.

There you have it. If you will conscientiously do this one thing – select an instructional leader as superintendent, and leave all employment decision to that instructional leader – then the academic scores of your students will soar.